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*E.A.J.G. Van der Borgh*

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# THE HEIDELBERG CATECHISM AND THE CHURCH

## ABSTRACT

What is the ecumenical potential and what are the limitations of the teaching on the church in the Heidelberg Catechism 450 years after its publication? This contribution provides an analysis of the only two Questions/Answers in the HC that specifically deal with ecclesiology. It also searches for references to ministry. After comparing with other, much more elaborate expositions of the theological meaning on the church in catechisms written by members of the drafting team of the HC, the article puts the HC ecclesiology in historical perspectives and explains its conciseness on the issue. After describing more recent interpretations of the teaching of the church in the HC, the text offers a list of ecumenical potentials and limitations.

## 1. THE INAUGURATION OF POPE FRANCIS AND THE HEIDELBERG CATECHISM

The election of Pope Francis in March 2013 has raised the hope for a change for the better, not only in the Roman Catholic Church, and in the global community as a whole. It has also touched the hearts of many of the faithful who belong to the confessional and orthodox spectrum of the Reformed tradition within the Netherlands, part of which still carries a culture of enmity over against the Roman Catholic Church.

The way the election of the new pope was documented by the Dutch newspaper *Reformatorisch Dagblad* (RD) illustrates this well. *Reformatorisch Dagblad* is a daily national newspaper that predominantly serves the informational needs of the most confessional section of the

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members of the Reformed denominations in the Netherlands. Its website does not only inform about the ecclesial and the theological debates within the Reformed tradition, but it also reports on developments in other churches and other religions. *Reformatorisch Dagblad* followed the election and inauguration of the new pope close by, even by offering a live player link on their website for his inauguration.

But after the live coverage had started, one of its subscribers twittered, “The pope is an important religious figure, but the question is whether the readers of the RD find it an important religious figure.” After that tweet, the editor in chief of *Reformatorisch Dagblad* decided to stop the live coverage. Also another reader reacted, “Is the” pope no longer seen as the antichrist?” (De Jong 2013). A few days later five ministers belonging to four of the denominations of the orthodox spectrum published a letter in *Reformatorisch Dagblad* with the title “Too much attention for the pope is inappropriate”. They contested the level of focus on the pope and the neutral coverage without any critical comment. After offering a variety of arguments, they finally turned to the Heidelberg Catechism. How is it possible, they argued, that in the year we celebrate 450 years of Heidelberg Catechism, we seem to be prepared to broadcast through our media a mass, labelled by the Catechism as idolatry? The letter was published with the covering page of the Heidelberg Catechism as illustration.<sup>1</sup>

The whole controversy obliged the editor in chief of the newspaper (Kranendonk 2013) to react in an editorial with the title “RD continues to report on the pope”. He defended the attention for the pope, because he is the religious leader of the biggest religious institution in the world and because he is a major player in the field of global politics. This level of attention should not be interpreted as the beginning of agreement with the institute of the papacy or of the teaching of the Roman Catholic Church. At the same time, he admitted that he had made a mistake. He should not have agreed with the live coverage of the inauguration of the pope. That was not in line with the appropriate reticence in relation to Rome and the papacy. And, last but not least, the incorporation of a mass in the

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1 See [http://www.refdag.nl/opinie/te\\_veel\\_aandacht\\_voor\\_paus\\_ongepast\\_1\\_724459](http://www.refdag.nl/opinie/te_veel_aandacht_voor_paus_ongepast_1_724459) consulted on 26 Oct 2013. The ministers belong to the Hersteld Hervormde Kerk, the Christelijk Gereformeerde Kerk, the Oud Gereformeerde Gemeenten and the Gereformeerde Gemeenten. They deplored that not only the Dutch government and the new king but also the church was now bowing for the yoke of Rome. They brought to memory that the Reformation had been an exodus of the slavery of Rome and that thousands of God’s children were executed on behalf of the pope, who the Roman Catholics understand as the substitute for Christ on earth. The anathemas of Rome against Luther and of the Council of Trent have never been withdrawn.

inauguration ceremony made it unacceptable, since with the Heidelberg Catechism, he confirmed the status of the Mass as idolatry.

This episode made me as a theologian acutely aware again of the sensitivities towards the Roman Catholic Church in part of the confessional section of the churches belonging to the Reformed tradition in the Netherlands, and also of the role played by the Heidelberg Catechism, especially the famous Question and Answer 80 on the Mass. But as an ecumenical theologian, I have also learned that differing views on the sacraments often hide a fundamental difference in the understanding of the church. It is for this reason that Faith and Order, after finishing their convergence document on *Baptist, Eucharist and Ministry* in 1982 decided to continue with a project on ecclesiology, the final result of which has been discussed at the General Assembly of the World Council of Churches in Busan, Korea in October and November 2013.

In this context, I use the opportunity to re-evaluate the teaching of the Heidelberg Catechism on the church. I limit myself to the understanding of the church in a more narrow sense, that is the theological interpretation of the church as a body, and ministry. I will not focus on the sacraments and the relationship with the state, issues dealt with under a broader understanding of ecclesiology and traditionally getting much attention in Reformed ecclesiological statements. As a consequence this article on the church in the Heidelberg Catechism will not focus on the sacraments. Neither will it have to worry about the pope as the antichrist since the Heidelberg Catechism does not deal with that issue. Instead I will look again into what the Heidelberg Catechism teaches on the church and its structures of ordained ministry.

This contribution provides an answer to the question what the actual ecumenical potential and limitations of the teaching on the church in the Heidelberg Catechism are. A similar kind of question has been central in the most recent volume of Lyle Bierma on the Heidelberg Catechism (Bierma 2013). After having observed that some fifty years ago, around the time of the 400<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Catechism, several theologians perceived an ecumenical spirit in the Heidelberger Catechism, Bierma (2013:1-2) has tried to evaluate the validity of the claim for the Catechism in its totality. In the concluding chapter, Bierma (2013:116-120) nuances this ecumenical claim, with reference to the polemical tone of some aspects – for example Question/Answer 80 on the Mass; with the realization that the motivation for this document was not solely theological but also very political in the context of the confessionalization policy of Frederik III; and with reference to the early divisive reception of the Confession (Mühling 2013:109-121). At the same time, he (Bierma

2013:121-2) recognizes ecumenical intentions among others in the official title page, not printed as “Heidelberger Catechism”, but “Catechism or Christian Instruction as This Is Carried on in Churches and Schools in the Electoral Palatinate”. He discovers this broader Christian approach as well in the Question/Answer 55 on the holy Catholic Church. But nowhere does he deal in detail with the ecumenical potential and limitations of the discussion on the church within the Confession. This is exactly what this article offers. With “potential” I mean these elements in its teaching on the church that can contribute on the worldwide theological discussion on ecclesiology for which the ecclesiological project of Faith and Order is an important focus. The “limitations” are these aspects that are generally understood as essential to the understanding of the Christian church at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, but are missing or underdeveloped in the Heidelberg Catechism.

The Heidelberg Catechism contains only two Questions/Answers that deal with traditional ecclesiology. This is remarkable for a Reformed confession, since the understanding of the church was often one of the main theological battle grounds during the Reformation. We will come back to the reason for this conciseness later in this contribution. But even if it is perceived as something missing (Weinrich 2013:317-8), the two Question/Answers on the church justify the analysis in this article.

I will first present an analysis of the articles on the church in the Heidelberg Catechism. I will continue with a comparison with some other catechisms written in the same years by major contributors to the Heidelberg Catechism in order to realize better its specificity. After having analyzed some recent examples of the *Wirkungsgeschichte* of the Heidelberg Catechism, I will conclude with describing its ecclesiological potentials and limitations.

## 2. THE CHURCH IN THE HEIDELBERG CATECHISM

The Heidelberg Catechism only deals with the church in two paragraphs, strictly limiting itself to the explanation of the two phrases used in the Apostolic Confession: “Credo ... sanctam ecclesiam catholicam, sanctorum communionem ...” The direct, personal and pastoral style that has made the Heidelberg Catechism so successful is immediately recognizable in these two paragraphs. Question 54 reads, “Was glaubstu von der heiligen allgemeinen Christlichen Kirchen?” And the answer breathes the same relational, almost intimate atmosphere:

Dasz der Son Gottes ausz dem gantzen menschlichen geschlecht,  
ihm ein auszerwelte gemein zum ewigen leben, durch seinen geist

und wort in einigkeyt des waren glaubens, von anbegin der welt, bisz  
ans end versamble, schütze vund erhalte, vnd dasz ich derselben ein  
lebendiges glied bin, vnnd ewig bleiben werde. (Gooszen 1890:98)

It strikes that no definition of what the church entails, is provided. Neither do the words “holy” or “catholic” return in the answer. The answer points instead to the Son of God who has gathered and protected a communion that He is now preserving and to I myself as a living member. What is being believed about the church is about being drawn into a communion with Christ and with other members and becoming a living participant.

The starting point is the work of Christ. This ecclesiology in a nutshell has a thoroughly Christological stamp. Since the initiative is Christ’s from the beginning to the end, it also breathes a predestinarian flavour, using election terminology (*auszerwelte*). That God is fully in control of this process of gathering, protecting and maintaining is accentuated with the framing of the church not having come into existence at Pentecost but at the beginning of the world, and with the repeated claim that having become member of the communion is for eternity. In this way, also this paragraph on the church expresses the central theme of comfort (Hofheinz 2013:376-8).

Four more aspects should be mentioned. Catholicity is explained in terms of the diversity of times (from the beginning of the world to its end) from which the congregation is selected. In this context, it is uncertain whether the expression “the whole human race” also carries a spatial connotation. Two, the Son’s instruments mentioned to gather, protect and preserve are the Spirit and the Word. Not only the placing of the Spirit before the Word should be noticed, also the absence of ordained ministry is remarkable. Three, though “one” or “unity” are not in the wording of question 54, unity is raised to prominence in answer 54. But, it is not the unity of the faithful; it refers to “the unity of the true faith”. The expression “true faith” with its opposition to false faith is the only reference with a more or less explicit polemical tone. Latzel (2004:194) interprets this as an implicit denial of an institutional, visible understanding of unity. Finally the relationship congregation/church to the world is unilateral. The world, that is the whole human race, provides potential candidates to become members of the church whose life gets a new perspective: eternal life. Whether the church could or should be offering something to the world is not at stake (Huijgen & Fesko 2013:390).

The second question continues in the same personalized way, following the Apostolic Creed:

Was verstehestu durch die gemeinschaftt der Heiligen?

As does the answer:

Erstlich dasz alle vnnd jede glaubigen, als glieder an dem Herren Christo, vnd allen seinen schätzen vnd gaben, gemeinschaftt haben. Zum andern, dasz ein jeder seine gaben zu nutz vnd heil der andern glieder, willig vnd mit freuden anzulegen sich schuldig wissen soll. (Gooszen 1890:98)

The accent is on community and not so much on saints. The dynamics in the community of saints is displayed in a double, non fully reciprocate way: the members, first of all communal but also individual, share in the community with Christ and his gifts, and second, the members of the congregation share with each other in order for the other members to benefit. Although not made explicit, the first movement seems to originate from the love and will of the Triune God to be in community with the elect, while the second movement being initiated by the members of the congregation is not self-evident. It is motivated by the preceding gracious reception in the community with Christ and his gifts, it is formulated in the way of a moral obligation, and the manner it should be done is made explicit – with readiness and joy.

Though none of the articles of the Heidelberg Catechism deals explicitly with the ordained ministry, one section has a specific reference in the context of church discipline, answering the question whom should take his or her place at the Table of the Lord (HC 81-5). HC 82 explains that based on the instruction of Christ and the apostles, the ministry of the keys of the Kingdom (“ampt der Schlüssel”) has to exclude from the Table those who do not profess the Christian faith and who do not live a godly life. HC 83 then defines the ministry of the keys in the context of church discipline:

Die Predig des heiligen Euangelions, und die Christliche Busszucht, durch welche beyde stuck, das Himmelreich den glaubigen auffgeschlossen, vnd den vnghaubige zugeschlossen wird. (Gooszen 1890:161)

The distinction between preaching and exercising of church discipline becomes evident from the new Church Order of the Palatine in 1563. This new Church Order will incorporate the fourth edition of the Heidelberg Catechism. The Church Order describes that discipline should not only be left to ministers (“kirchendiener”), but that the whole congregation should be involved. For this reason next to the ministers, honourable and pious men from the congregation should be elected in order to help with discipline next to the ministers (Sehling 1969:388). This accent on church discipline has to be understood in the context of Frederik III’s awareness of the urgent need for a practical reformation of the Palatine church. This

need had already become evident during the reign of his predecessor, Ottheinrich (1556-1559). The report of the wide-range church visitations in 1556 describes a church in a dreadful situation: growing influence of the radical reformation, few properly trained ministers, and many parishioners clinging to folk tradition (Gunnøe 2005:35). The 1563 Church Order added to the existing superintendents, the ministry of the deacon. The same Church Order also mentioned the responsibility for discipline. In line with this the 1570 version of the Church Order provided rules for the election of elders (Strohm 2013:57). Church discipline was not only urgent; it was also a theological delicate issue. Was protecting moral and legal order within the church a responsibility of civil authorities, as the reformers from Zurich claimed, or was it the responsibility of the church itself, without interference of civil authorities, as Calvin claimed in Geneva? In line with the way the reformation of the church in Palatine took shape under the direct steering of the Elector, civil authorities through “honorable and pious men” would become in charge of discipline within the church, in line with the Zurich arrangements.

The only other reference to ministry is traced in the explanation of the fourth commandment (HC 103). “Gott will erstlich, dasz das Predigamt vnd Schulen erhalten worden ...” (Gooszen 1890:200) that is God wants first of all that preaching ministry and teaching will be maintained. We have to conclude that ministry and leadership in the church are not a topic on its own. In dealing with other issues, there is reference to and reminder of an existing practice: those responsible for accepting or refusing entrance to the Lord’s Supper and the ministry of preaching on the Sabbath day.

To summarize, the discussion of the theme of the church in the Heidelberg Catechism is concise, briefly explaining the two phrases of the Apostolic Confession. It confirms the overall personalized, pastoral, irenic tone of the Heidelberg Catechism.

The brevity of the treatment of the church in the Heidelberg Catechism contrast with the much more extensive attention for the church in the *Confessio Belgica*, that other central confession of the Reformed tradition on the Continent in the sixteenth century. In the *Confessio Belgica*, 6 of the 36 articles deal with the theology of the church, three of them on ministry. The explanation is to be found in the difference of context, although written in the same period. The 1561 *Confessio Belgica* was the product of a persecuted church pleading with indignation to the civil authorities in order to be recognized as the true catholic church instead of the church of Rome (Van der Borgh 2012). The 1563 Heidelberg Catechism is the product of a more or less steadfast process of reformation of a church under the leadership of the civil authorities. In the preface to the first



edition of the Heidelberg Catechism, Elector Frederik III explains why he commissioned a new catechism: as catechetical tool for teaching children and as a preaching guide for instructing the common people.<sup>2</sup> The new catechism was an instrument used to shape confessional unity between the several Protestant factions in the Palatine (Bierma 2005b:51-2; Bierma 2013:117-18). The fact that only two paragraphs are dedicated to the church is an indication that the understanding of the church was not central in the disputes between Reformed and Lutherans. The controversies of the understanding of the church and ministry took place in relation to the Church of Rome and in relation to the Anabaptist and other movements within the radical reformation.

### 3. OTHER CATECHISMS IN HEIDELBERG

To have an even more clearer profile of the specific teaching of the HC on the church, it makes sense to compare the Heidelberg Catechism with some other catechisms written in the same period by members of the team that produced the Heidelberg Catechism. I make a short comparison with the Catechism Minor and the Catechism Major, both written by Zacharias Ursinus, and with a catechism published in German with the title *Vester Grund*, by Casper Olevianus.

Ursinus has been identified as the major drafter of the team that wrote the Heidelberg Catechism (Bierma 2005b:67-74). Bierma concludes his research on the time when both the so called Catechesis Minor (CMi) and the Catechesis Maior (CMA)<sup>3</sup> were written and their aims in the following manner:

(2) that he (Ursinus) composed the Smaller Catechism in late 1561 or early 1562 and the Larger Catechism in late 1562; (3) that the Smaller Catechism was designed as a simple catechism for untutored adults and children, possibly commissioned but certainly employed as a preliminary draft for the Heidelberg Catechism; and (4) that the Larger Catechism was designed as midlevel theological text for university students, not commissioned for the writing of the

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- 2 G.W. Richards, *The Heidelberg Catechism: Historical and Doctrinal Studies*, Philadelphia; Publication and Sunday School Board of the Reformed Church in the United States (1913) provided on pp. 182-99 a facsimile of the German text of the preface with an English translation on the facing pages. See for an analysis of the preface, Bierma (2005:50-2).
  - 3 The original Latin version of both Catechisms is printed under the original German version of the Heidelberg Catechism in Gooszen (1890). A translation of the Smaller and Larger Catechisms with introduction on the texts and Ursinus's likely authorship in Bierma (2005:137-223).

Heidelberg Catechism but probably consulted late in the process.  
(Bierma 2005c:138)

If we compare the Catechism with the Heidelberg Catechism it strikes that the two questions of the church in the Heidelberg Catechism are an almost literary translation of the Catechesis Minor. The first question follows the text word by word with the exception of the reversal of Word and Spirit. The second Q/A reads in translation:

Q. Why do you call it “the communion of saints”?

A. Because all believers share in the same Christ and the same benefits that Christ gives to his church; and because all individuals should gladly contribute their gifts to the enrichment of the whole body of the church. (Bierma 2005c:148)

The Catechesis Minor has the same focus on the communion and the same double movement is explained. The conclusion can only be that in the Heidelberg Catechism, when it comes to the church, the text is fully depended on the Catechesis Minor, a catechism intended, according to Bierma, for untutored children and adults.

The briefness of the Heidelberg Catechism, in the trail of the Catechesis Minor, stands out if one compares with the twelve Question/Answers dedicated to the church in the Catechesis Major. It starts with a question on a definition of the church (CMA 113).

Q. What is that church that you believe exists?

A. It is a community of persons elected by God for eternal life and born again by the Holy Spirit, who embrace the pure doctrine of the gospel with true faith, use the sacraments according to the divine institution, fulfill the obedience, owed to the ministry, and are given righteousness and eternal life because of and through Christ.

The tone is different, much more theological. Next to the work of the Trinity, the responsibility of the members is explained in a threefold manner: embrace pure doctrine of the gospel, pure administration of the sacraments and obedience to the ministry. It continues with a question on the holiness of the church (A: that is God’s work in Christ and the Spirit) and one on its catholicity (A: all times, all peoples and all places). CMA 116 matches HC 55 on the communities of saints.

But then many more Question/Answers follow on the aspects of the community of the saints. What is the basis for the communion of the saints in Christ? A: The Holy Spirit. Can the church been distinguished from

other people by the human eye? A: No the Lord alone recognizes his own. How then can we unite with it? A: We have to join the visible church. Next question: What is that visible church? The answer (CMA 120) reads:

It is the community of persons who by their words and external deeds profess the uncorrupted doctrine of the gospel, the proper use of the sacraments, and the obedience owed to the ministry, even though some in it are saints and others hypocrites.

It is a partly a repetition of the answer to question 113 on the identity of the church, but in this case excluding the contribution of God and focusing exclusively on the work of human members in the already mentioned three aspects of pure preaching of the gospel, and pure administration of the sacraments and obedience to the ministry. It continues with more questions: one on the difference between the visible church and the church of the saints; one on in what way the church of the saints is also invisible; and one on the necessity to be members of the church in order to be saved. And then, how do we know whether we are in the church of the saints? Answer: the experience of the beginning of true faith, conversion to God in us and the witness of our lives. The last Question/Answer (CMA 125) recapitulate the ecclesiological part of the Apostolic Confession:

Q. What does it mean to believe “a holy catholic church, the communion of saints”?

A. It means not to doubt that, from the beginning of the world to the end, a church elected for eternal life has been gathered and preserved on the earth by the Son of God through the Holy Spirit and ministry of the gospel, and that we are and forever will remain living members of the church.

We recognize the pastoral tone of HC 54, but with the difference that in the CMA 125 the ministry of the gospel as human contribution is added.

We conclude with the observation that in this Catechesis Maior, written about the time of the Heidelberg Catechism, some of the traditional aspects of the developing Reformed ecclesiology become visible: elements such as the pure preaching of the gospel and the pure administration of the sacraments; the role played by ministry and the need for obedience. The fronts are implicitly present. Over against the stress on human sanctity in the Radical Reformation, holiness as divine gift is confessed. Over against the request within the Radical Reformation to retreat from the visible church, the need to be members of the visible church is confirmed, even if hypocrites are members. Over against the claim of the Church of Rome that the reformers left behind the catholicity of the church, the catholicity of

the church is maintained. Over against the Church of Rome, the distinction between the visible church and the church of the saints -that is the invisible church – is maintained. The real church is not a human construct, but the work of the Triune God.

After it has dealt with the Lord's Prayer, the Catechesis Major ends with a discussion of ministry within the church, the sacraments and a final section on church discipline. The ministry of the church is identified as public preaching of God's Word, the administration of the sacraments, and maintaining church discipline, three elements instituted by Christ (CMa 264). The institution of ministry is understood in the context of God's covenantal relationship with the elect (CMa 265-6). The work of ministry does not take away the honor of the Holy Spirit; because it is in divine wisdom that God chose to work through the foolish preaching of the cross (CMa 267). The content of the preaching of the ministers should only be the Word of God in law and gospel, in conformity with the Articles of Faith (CMa 268-9). Private learning of the Word is not enough; public ministry is also necessary, because it is God's commandment, in order to arrive at public glorification, and at the unity of the church (CMa 270-1). Through the preaching, the Holy Spirit teaches us the promises and the expectation of God, and offers persuasion and endurance (CMa 272-3). This discussion of ministry within the church is Reformed in tone and content: the three aspects of preaching, sacraments and discipline, and the arguments for public ministry. Also here the first front seems to be the Radical Reformation in which voices doubted the need for public ministry. The second front is the Church of Rome over against which the need for the limitation of the content of the preaching to the Word of God is stressed. The final paragraphs in the Catechesis Major describe the procedure in which elders play a role (CMa 321), the difference between church discipline and the responsibility of the political magistrate (CMa 322), and the justification for church discipline (CMa 323).

Caspar Olevianus, one of the other members of the drafting team of the Heidelberg Catechism (Bierma 2005b:49-74), also wrote a catechism, originally in German, *Vester Grund*.<sup>4</sup> It was first published in 1567 as a popular catechism, explaining the Apostles Creed. Though not officially linked to the Heidelberg Catechism, it functioned from early on as an interpretive guide for this catechism. (Bierma 1995: xv-xxvii) Bierma (1995:xxvi-xxviii) suggests that a major reason for publishing an extensive catechism in the same period as the Heidelberg Catechism may have been

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4 For this paper I use the translation and edited by L.D. Bierma in Caspar Olevianus, *A Firm Foundation: An Aid to Interpreting the Heidelberg Catechism*, Grand Rapids: Baker Books (1995). I will use the abbreviation VG.

the unease of Olevianus about the brevity of the Heidelberg Catechism. In a letter to Bullinger he explained the need for more clarity on some dogmatic issues, especially in relation to the sacraments.

The two questions of the Heidelberg Catechism on the church have in the Vester Grund been expanded to 7 questions with extensive answers. The first question on the church in the Heidelberg Catechism (54) is the same as VG 132, but the answer is expanded extensively. Most of the wording of the answer of the Heidelberg Catechism is taken over in Vester Grund, but also expanded by framing it in the context of God's covenant and the covenant sign of baptism. Vester Grund deals with the question why the confession says "I believe a holy catholic church" and not "I believe in the holy catholic church". The issue is not dealt with in the Heidelberg Catechism, nor in Catechesis Minor or Catechesis Maior, but is a well known issue returning in many teaching on the church within the Reformed tradition. The front here is the Church of Rome with its tendency to identify the church with God. Vester Grund continues with two Q/A's on the church being holy and on being one catholic. The one on "one catholic" focuses not on the church being catholic but on its unity, a unity founded on its being put from the beginning of creation until the end of time under one Head, Christ. Also here the front is the Church of Rome, which is accused of replacing Christ by the pope as the head of the church. HC 55 on the meaning of the communion of saints compares to VG 136. The next Q/A explains the remaining Articles of Faith in relation to the church as the benefit of Christ for this life and the life to come. VG 138 explains the benefits for this life in terms of the forgiveness of sin:

just as there is no salvation outside of the Church, which is the body of Christ, so also all true and living members of the Church now possess true salvation, that is, forgiveness of sins.

We can conclude that in the comparison between the Heidelberg Catechism, the Catechesis Major and Vester Grund, it is especially the Catechesis Maior that expresses the broader agenda of the controversial issues at stake in the theology of the church. Vester Grund adds the notion of believing the church instead of believing in the church, and it gives more attention to the unity of the church under Christ. Where the Catechesis Maior seems to focus on the controversies with the Radical Reformation, Vester Grund seems more to echo the discussions with the Church of Rome. This focus on contesting the understanding of the church by Rome is attested by the fierce attack on the church of Rome in a Question/Answer on the second coming of Christ:

Finally, the second coming of Christ admonishes us especially to separate ourselves body and soul, from the idolatry of the Roman Anti-Christ (Olevianus 1995:88).

The comparison with the other catechisms by the main authors of the HC from the same period leads me to two conclusions. First of all, through the comparison with the Catechesis Minor, it becomes even more evident what the Elector had written in his preface. The aim is to teach children and instructing the common people. So also what it teaches on the church is basic. Two, the authors of the Heidelberg Catechism were fully aware of the controversies in relation to the church and ministry. But, probably because of its prime audience and because church and ministry were not really contested among Lutherans and Reformed in the context of the Palatine at that time, the teaching on the church could be very concise and the teaching on ministry could be left out.

#### 4. RECENT TEACHING ON THE CHURCH INSPIRED BY THE HC

The history of what happened with this local catechism has been told over and over. It was reprinted and well received, especially among those belonging to the Reformed tradition. It was officially recognized as catechism by the Reformed church in the Netherlands during the 1560s, and confirmed at the Synod of Dordt in 1618-9. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century it became part of the three forms of unity in the battle that raged over liberal theology. Making reference to the Heidelberg Catechism was a sign of orthodoxy. The Heidelberg Catechism had become a “lieu de memoire” that helped to establish the identity of confessional groups. That is a remarkable accomplishment for a local catechism intended for children and common people. And this raises the question: Has it still the potential today to inspire teaching on the church and ministry, even if it is very brief on the issue and does not deal with ministry? Apparently it does. I briefly revisit three examples: one by a theologian, one by a minister writing for the local congregation, and one confession, the Belhar Confession.

First of all, the theologian Eberhard Busch published in 1998 *Der Freiheit zugetan: Christliche Glaube heute – im Gespräch mit dem Heidelberger Katechismus*. Two short articles on the church in the HK inspired him to write thirteen very full pages on the church (Busch 1998:186-98). What he writes is testimony of how for him the HC on the church still is relevant for the church in Germany at the end of the second millennium in a very different context, a context in which he observed a lot of churchly imperialism and secularism. Over against the church and its ministries,

he points to the freedom we have received in Jesus Christ. He links the focus in the HC on the relationship with Christ in the church with freedom of human authorities in and outside the church that threaten our freedom in Christ. In the background of this re-reading of the teaching of the HC on the church, echoes of the Barmen declaration and of the theology of Karl Barth are clearly audible. The ecclesiological section of the HC without reference to the ordained ministry inspires a theological imagination in which the church and its ministry are critically perceived.

A second example comes from a recent volume in Dutch, *Catechismus. nu: De Heidelberger voor vandaag*. Editors are Wim Verboom, the Dutch academic theologian who has written most extensive on the Heidelberg Catechism in the Netherlands in recent decades and Piet Vergunst, general secretary of the Reformed League within the Protestant Church in the Netherlands (Veldhuizen 2013:111-9). The volume wants to support these congregations in which the teaching of the Heidelberg Catechism is an ongoing practice. It also contains a chapter on the church. Its theological imagination stays close to the original text and gives attention to each phrase and explains its relevance for the local congregation today and its individual members in relation to Christ. Because of the origins of the church at the beginning of the world, the author, as Busch also does, stresses the continuing link with the people of Israel. In explaining the phrase “the entire human race”, he calls on the congregation to support mission and diaconate, while the original notion of catholicity seems to have been lost.

In South Africa a reference to the link with the Belhar Confession is appropriate. Robert Vosloo in his opening address to the conference mentioned the gloss BK XXI, 54-55 in the handwritten draft of the Belhar Confession, referring to Sunday 21, articles 54 and 55 on the church. The opening article reads “We believe in the triune God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, who gathers, protects and cares for his Church by his Word and his Spirit, as He has done since the beginning of the world and will do to the end.” The second part of this introductory article is an almost literal citation from HC 54. This expression of confessional orthodoxy indicates the belief that the God who is confessed in the Belhar Confession is the same God confessed in the Heidelberg Catechism. At the same time we become aware of the limitations of the Heidelberg Catechism. Because exactly at the point of contestation in the Dutch Reformed family in South Africa with regard to the understanding of the unity of the church, the Heidelberg Catechism has been of no help. Unity is not in the question of article 54 and when it appears in the answer it is a reference to the unity of the true faith. But also the expression “the entire human race” in the context from the beginning of the world to its end does not stimulate a

spatial interpretation, in the sense of the entire human race uniting the diversity of people on the earth. Also hear the notion of catholicity is painfully missed. How exciting would it have been, if a direct quote from HC 54-55 in art. 2 of the Belhar Confession on the unity of the church could have been made.

## 5. POTENTIAL AND LIMITATION

The Heidelberg Catechism is a local catechism from the sixteenth century intended to be learned by heart by those who cannot or not yet read, so for illiterate adults and children, and its section on the church contains only two articles. Against this background, it is fascinating that after 450 years, congregations of the Reformed tradition continue to use it as the main manual for instruction of the Christian faith, also on the church. It is remarkable that leading theologians use it as the main guide for the explanation of the Christian faith in the current era, also for the teaching on the church. It is telling that the Belhar Confession explicitly refers to the ecclesiological section of the Heidelberg Catechism. This brings us to the question what the secret is of this potential in relation to the understanding of the church. A catechism for children is as difficult as a good bible for children, or as explaining the gospel to children. You must be able to transfer the message without jargon, without difficult argumentation, and with the ability to relate to their experiences. You can only do that by focusing on the basic issues, but in such a way that you also capture the essential elements of the message. Apparently the Heidelberg Catechism has been able to do that in such a way that it still resonates in our context in a very strong and appealing way. So what are these essential elements that have an ecumenical potential?

1. First of all, the notion that the church is God's work. The study of the church from a sociological perspective is very helpful to get insight in the group mechanisms within the church. And looking at leadership within the church from a management perspective can be very insightful. But from a theological perspective, the awareness that the church is God's work is primordial. The insight is so often lost by those who work in the church, as by those who study her. For this reason the church is part of the credo, because it is God's work, God's creation.
2. Two, the church is described in relational terms. Church is about communion with God and with each other. The organizational aspect is only secondary, it is an instrument that serves the prime purpose: to create space for God to speak to us and to transform us from random



group in to a communion of brothers and sisters. All this resonates in the ecumenical theological keyword of *koinonia*.

3. God comes to us through Word and Spirit. These are exactly the two elements that have been singled out as the channels to which God comes to us in the successive drafts of the ecclesiological project of Faith and Order.
4. The church is a place of comfort. The church is where people experience that they are “gathered, protected and preserved” in the succession of generations from the beginning of the world until its end. This comfort is expressed in received hope, strength, faith, love, endurance, empathy, etc. As far as I can see the ecumenical theology of the church can still learn from this approach.
5. The church is brought into eschatological perspective, it is a community chosen for eternal life. This helps us to look further than its actual shape and its life with its restrictions, its lack of dynamism, its elements of human sinfulness.
6. The church is the place where the love of the Christ reaches each individual and challenges her of him to contribute his gift to the communion. I am a living member that may readily and joyfully share the gifts we receive. Ecumenical ecclesiology will gain from incorporating the appeal to the individual members and their gifts, their charismas.

And as a contextual catechism with only two articles on the church, it must have its limitations in relation to its ecumenical potential for its teaching on the church.

1. The unity of the church is absent in the question of art. 54, and when it appears in the answer, the unity is qualified as true faith over against false faith. This qualification of unity reduces its scope, suggesting that the unity exists only on the basis of doctrinal agreement. It has helped to open the door for the justification of denominationalisation, as has happened in Protestant Europe.
2. The concept of catholicity is present in the question of art. 54 but absent in the answer. If the “entire human race” is intended to describe that, then the awareness that the church is of all times and all places tends to be reduced to all times in relation with the phrase “from the beginning of the world to its end”. The diversity of different places and peoples within the unity is what makes the church a place full of potential to make people meet over all socio-cultural borders and become sisters and brothers in Christ Jesus, family of God. The

reduced notion of unity and the absence of catholicity weaken its ecumenical potential.

3. The two paragraphs sketch a dynamic of being called of the world with a new focus on eternal life. The elected are called upon to serve each other within the community. Any reference to a dynamic from the church to the world is lacking. This church does not have an explicit mission and if it has an implicit mission, calling people out of the world, than it is one sided.
4. The absence of ministry is an ecumenical problem. The ecumenical theology contains an important section on ministry, that is leadership responsible for unity and continuity with the apostolic message. The silence on ministry can be historically explained but it is also more than that. This Christian tradition born out of indignation over power abuse finds it difficult to engage with ministry in a serene way.

This analysis of ecumenical potential and limits of the ecclesiological section of the Heidelberg Catechism illustrates the strength and weaknesses of Reformed ecclesiology. All this focus on comfort and relationship is not a guarantee for an inclusive communion. It can easily become a mono socio-economic status group or a mono socio-cultural group, which finds it relatively easy to find comfort and natural relationship in its own group. By being compartmentalized in various socio-economic and socio-cultural groups the church reflects the tendency in of our glocalised world. The church has the potential to become a communion where diversity of peoples is recognized and at the same time the unity of all in Christ is confirmed and lived. For this reason, the concepts of unity and catholicity are indispensable. They challenge the tendency to become an in-crowd and to open up for those who do not fit the dominant social identity.

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